

What Do The Lamp, The Oil, And Sleepiness Symbolize in The Parable Of The 10 Virgins?

Written By

Fr. Gaetano Piccolo

For those who have had the experience of keeping watch over a sick person through the night, especially if it was a very close loved one, you know what it means to fight off sleep. You do everything in your power to stay awake; you use every ounce of strength; you draw on all your resource, but even so you fall asleep, perhaps only briefly, moments that escape your control. The same happens in life: though we try with all our might to stay alert, sometimes we just fall asleep.

We fall asleep out of tiredness or out of distrust. We fall asleep because we are disappointed or because we don't want to see the truth of things around us. We fall asleep because we are superficial or because we have lost the courage to hold out a little longer.

This passage of the Gospel describes the sleepiness that spreads through the community that tires of waiting for the Bridegroom. It should be a night of celebration and joy because He that we have been waiting for is finally returning: the Bridegroom, the one that brings the fullness of life. But instead, the night becomes frustrating: things don't happen as we had hoped. God doesn't work according to our schedule and the Bridegroom does not arrive when we want him to.

According to the parable, everyone falls asleep: both the wise virgins and the foolish ones. **It is as if to say that falling asleep is inevitable, a fact of life.** It is not avoiding sleep that differentiates the wise from the foolish.

The parable centers on different symbols: the lamp and the oil. They are common symbols throughout the Bible. **The lamp reminds us of Jesus' invitation to be the light of the world**, that the lamp cannot be hidden under a bushel. It reminds us that life should not be wasted and that we can't hide from life. It also reminds us of the City on a Hill that shines for the

wayfarers, so that they can see their goal, just as our lives should shine for others and help them find their way.

The ten virgins with their lamps especially remind us of the community invited to dance for joy and celebrate the coming of the Bridegroom. It is the symbol of the Church called to wait joyfully for the coming of Christ. This symbol could remind us of the Jewish interpretation of the chorus of virgins in the *Song of Songs*: the disciples that carry the light of the Law (the Torah) and keep watch for the Messiah.

The lamp however needs oil to continue to shine: it is the oil used to keep watch for and welcome the Bridegroom, the oil of welcoming. But oil is also what the Good Samaritan uses to heal the wounds of the man beaten down by life. And above all, oil is what is used to anoint and consecrate the Messiah, He for whom our hearts continuously hope.

Therefore, oil is the symbol of very deep and very personal gestures. Perhaps it is for this reason the foolish virgins have little luck at the marketplace. **There are things in life that we must do alone, things that no one else can do for us.** There are situations that we must be prepared for because there won't be another opportunity.

What is the difference then between the foolish virgins and the wise ones? It's not in their ability to stay awake but in how they've prepared their lamps. Sometimes our lamp can even go out but if we know how to light it again and to use it, in dark times we will know what to do.

The problem of the foolish virgins is not sleepiness but something more fundamental. They never took care of the lamp that they were given. The Bridegroom even says that he does not know them. In their lives they have never cared about the Bridegroom and that is why they are unprepared now.

In the middle of the night, even in the deepest darkness, a cry of joy will wake us. The night cannot last forever; the Bridegroom will return. Do not put your lamps away in a closet but have them on hand and lit, even if the world says that it's foolish and pointless.